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Coronavirus test for military organisation in Russia

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The Kremlin defines the role of the Russian Federation as a superpower in the international arena in terms of the strength it can bring to bear due to its resources, and this is the backdrop for the Kremlin's plans to integrate the capacities of the 'forces ministries' into a coherent state military organisation. The system, which was created to mobilise the various resources, and develop a capacity for them to be used flexibly to further Russia's strategic political goals, has also been put to the test in the current epidemiological crisis. One form in which this has manifested itself is marginalisation of the Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM), which officially is in charge of coordinating crisis response operations.



If the effectiveness of measures to deal with coronavirus is to be measured by performance of state institutions, the way their activities are coordinated, and public trust in the authorities, Russia has failed the test. Meanwhile, regardless of the flaws in military organisation of the country (the system being overregulated, chaotic management, multiple coordinating bodies, disjointed decision-making) the 'forces ministries' have affirmed their position as the beneficiaries under the system. The internal and external political goals (long-term survival of the regime, information war with the West) have taken precedence over social goals. The discord between propaganda and the true situation has exacerbated public distrust of the authorities.

Civil crisis management at an end in Russia?

The body responsible for crisis management is EMERCOM, which has an official headcount of 288,500. The central apparatus controls the local structures spread around the Russian Federation's administrative units. Since 2008, the body responsible for coordinating their activities has been the National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC). In emergency situations, the NCMC also takes charge of the activities of the

agencies involved in dealing with them, from local government through the communications, transport, and health ministries and the Rospotrebnadzor sanitary regulator to the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Defence, Rosgvardiya, etc. Its duties include monitoring threats, operating the threat notification systems, and organising paramedic services. Military rescue units are also part of the civil defence forces under EMERCOM control, which are deployed for instance to deal with radiological, chemical, and biological contamination.



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The crisis management system itself operates on the basis of federal law, for example laws on 'states of emergency', 'special situations' and 'protecting the population against natural disasters'. A state of emergency is declared by the president in cases of large-scale natural disasters (recently during the forest wildfires of 2010), while a 'special situation' is a situation declared by EMERCOM up to ten or even twenty times a year in cases of natural and other disasters, and when people's lives and health are at risk from an epidemic (a 'special situation' was declared in June due to an environmental disaster in the Arctic; in the case of COVID-19, only a regime of high alert was declared). Various ministries are involved in enforcing compliance with procedures and restrictions in this case.

During the pandemic, the EMERCOM crisis management and response system described above was not activated for reasons for which both the Kremlin and EMERCOM itself were responsible. This was primarily due to structural reform of EMERCOM, which essentially has been ongoing since 2012, when Vladimir Puchkov took over as head of the ministry. Puchkov focused on the forces and civil defence command system. In 2018, his successor, Evgeny Zinichev, continued the reform. Zinichev is a former bodyguard of Vladimir Putin, and later served as governor of Kaliningrad and deputy director of the FSB. Upon taking office, he embarked on a cleansing of personnel (at that time the president dismissed six EMERCOM generals), and at the end of 2019 he announced that more than 500 organisational units in the ministry would be closed¹, and that this would go hand in hand with much emphasised measures to fight corruption and the arrest of members of the management of regional structures (including Tatarstan and the Lipetsk, Kurgan, Tver, Kemerovo, and Yaroslavl Oblasts).

As a result, following the outbreak of the pandemic, neither the Standing Committee for Prevention

and Countering Special Situations, chaired by the head of EMERCOM, nor the NCMC² were up to the task. This led the president to order further reform – he submitted a legislative proposal amending the 'Act on Protecting the Population against Natural Disasters', making the NCMC part of EMERCOM, and no longer a unit under his control, to make it more effective. The prime minister was also given additional powers with regard to coordinating crisis response and declaring states of high alert and special situations³.

” When the pandemic broke out, EMERCOM structures responsible for crisis management in Russia were not up to the task.

The decision to relieve the authority afforded statutory jurisdiction of the power to coordinate operations ran contrary to assurances that the crisis response system was well prepared. The damage done to EMERCOM's image was probably intended to be countered by a press conference held by Putin with governors on 27 April 2020. Zinichev also appeared in person at a residence in Novo-Ogaryovo, and, together with the president, analysed the situation regarding fires and flood prevention in the regions, emphasising the success achieved by the ministry. At that time, he did not raise the issue of dealing with COVID-19: according to the public statements he has made since the beginning of March, at the moment EMERCOM is primarily concerned with construction of crisis response centres in the Arctic and safeguarding northern sea route shipping⁴.

¹ М. Бондаренко, М. Юшков, 'МЧС России решило ликвидировать более 500 своих учреждений', РБК, 24 September 2019, www.rbc.ru.

² М. Солопов, 'Почему в России до сих пор не объявили режим чрезвычайной ситуации — и как его будут вводить в ближайшее время', Медуза, 31 March 2020, www.meduza.io.

³ Source: TASS, RIA Novosti (22 April 2020). See Законопроект № 931192-7 О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации по вопросам предупреждения и ликвидации чрезвычайных ситуаций, СОЗД ГАС «Законотворчество», sozd.duma.gov.ru.

⁴ This was EMERCOM's response to the signing on 5 March 2020 by President Putin of *The Grounds for the Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic up until 2035*. See Т. Борисов, 'Спасение при минус сорока и ниже', Российская Газета, 11 March 2020, www.rg.ru; 'МЧС обеспечит безопасность реализации проектов в Арктике и мореплавания по Севморпути', Север-Пресс, 29 April 2020, www.sever-press.ru. Subsequently, Zinichev

The missing elements in the crisis management system were provided by the Russian Federation Government's Coronavirus Coordination Council⁵ (set up 14 March), headed by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, which included the heads of all of the 'forces ministries', an operational staff created additionally on 30 March, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova, which includes an epidemic growth information centre, and a State Council task force appointed by the president and headed by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin. Due to this task force, the 'model' activities of the authorities of the capital, which is at the epicentre of the outbreak (police and Rosgvardiya cordon around the city, patrols to enforce the system of passes limiting movement of residents, use of digital surveillance technology to enforce quarantine and lockdown), could be duplicated by regional authorities, which have been given responsibility for the success of coronavirus countermeasures in their jurisdictions. One of the consequences of the panicked response on the part of some governors, who stopped people entering their jurisdictions or parts of their jurisdictions (such as Nizhny Novgorod, Chechnya), and of stoppages in all of the industrial plants, was the blocking of some transportation routes and industrial chains. Some of the regional restrictions were lifted following intervention from Moscow⁶.

On a central level, more activity to counter COVID-19 can be seen in the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of the Interior, and Rosgvardiya than the ministry that has statutory responsibility for this matter. The Ministry of Defence has been conducting tests of readiness to combat infection and demonstrating its bacteriological defence capacity

in Radiological, Chemical, and Biological Defence Forces exercises. It has also built sixteen modular infectious disease hospitals in the regions at risk, and four more are under construction. It also releases daily updates on the measures it is taking in a special bulletin on its website⁷. Meanwhile, for the purpose of foreign policy, it organises 'facemask diplomacy', one element of which is the much-heralded convoys with medical aid for Italy and Serbia. EMERCOM's public activities principally amount to drafting recommendations and procedures to be followed during a pandemic, devising awareness-raising schemes to inform the public of the consequences of not complying with lockdown regulations, and disinfecting public infrastructure and facilities.

Military organisation of state and crisis management

The first indication that 'civil' crisis management might be at an end was a statement made by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in April 2019 regarding plans to set up regional centres to coordinate the activities of the 'forces ministries' during crisis. At that time, the Ministry of Defence signed a trial agreement regarding this matter with the governor of the Tula Oblast, former Federal Defence Service (FDS) general Aleksei Diumin. The task of the proposed centres is to monitor the social and economic situation, and infrastructure problems, in the regions. In Shoigu's view, this is "a milestone in development of a state and defence management system⁸: During a crisis, the regional authorities will work directly with the Ministry of Defence and EMERCOM, as well as bodies responsible for protecting the legal system. In peacetime, the Ministry of Defence will be provided with reports on the social situation of military personnel and their families, implementation of conscription plans, etc."

emphasised the importance of the EMERCOM, declaring an emergency situation due to the ecological disaster in Norylsk, where there was a spillage of 20 000 tonnes of fuel. See 'МЧС России готово обеспечивать мероприятия по развитию Арктических территорий и безопасному мореплаванию по Северному морскому пути', МЧС России, 7 July 2020, www.mchs.gov.ru.

⁵ Координационный совет по борьбе с COVID-19, Стопкоронавирус.рф — Официальный интернет-ресурс для информирования населения по вопросам коронавируса (COVID-19).

⁶ See I. Wiśniewska, 'Gospodarka pod respiratorem. Skutki pandemii i załamania się cen ropy naftowej dla Rosji', *OSW Commentary*, no. 333, 19 May 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

⁷ See Информационный бюллетень Министерства обороны Российской Федерации по недопущению распространения новой коронавирусной инфекции.

⁸ 'Шойгу пообещал создать во всех регионах кризисные центры управления', *Бизнес Online*, 10 April 2019, www.business-gazeta.ru.

This statement demonstrated a shift in the approach to military administration as a result of revision of the concept of *Wojennaja Organizacyja Gosudarstwa i Obszczestwa*. While, in the past, this was understood as a defence system, today it is becoming an essential element of management of the state. This term can be translated in two ways, as 'wartime organisation', i.e. a state defence system officially formulated in law, and 'military organisation' (MO) of management of the state – militarisation of policy and administration. In very general terms, a broad range of military means and methods of operation are intended to be used for various political goals, as well as to entrench values such as civil obedience and subordination to the authorities.

The currently applicable *Russian Federation War-time Doctrine* of 2014 defines the term 'wartime organisation of the state' as the "entire range of state and military authorities, Armed Forces, other forces, armed formations, and bodies, and special formations created for times of war, on which those authorities are founded, and which operate by military means, and the country's industrial and defence complex, jointly working to prepare for armed defence and to conduct armed defence of the Russian Federation" (point 8). The convoluted phrase "Armed Forces, other forces, armed formations, and bodies" is featured in practically every document regulating Russian national security issues and is a synonym for the 'forces ministries'. They have a common mission, which among other things is to ensure integrity of the state, stability of the constitutional order and state institutions, and social calm, take measures to counteract terrorism, extremism, and ethnic separatism, and deal with special situations such as epidemics and pandemics.

A list of the ministries referred to above is given in article 1 of an amendment passed in 2017 to the federal 'defence' law. Under that article, in addition to state and military administration bodies, forces in which service in the military is envisaged also play a role in defence of the Russian Federation. These forces are the Armed Forces and other forces, rescue formations of

the federal executive body with civil defence jurisdiction (EMERCOM), the Foreign Intelligence Service, bodies in the Federal Security Service (FSB), state security bodies (FSO), military prosecution service authorities, Russian Federation Investigation Committee military investigation bodies, the federal authority for Russian Federation state authority mobilisation preparations (GUSP), and special formations created in case of war.

” The measures taken by the authorities in Moscow, which is at the epicentre of the outbreak, were duplicated by regional authorities, which have been given responsibility for coronavirus countermeasures in their jurisdictions.

Even in 2013, Putin was talking about the strategic priority of expanding the MO, in response to "changes in Russia's international position"⁹. The president summarised the progress made in implementation of the MO development strategy for 2020 at a meeting of the Russian Federation Security Council on 22 November 2019¹⁰, saying that the second decade had brought an "increase in the level of performance of the forces ministries", and that the primary tasks for the third decade (up until 2030) were to continue that process, ensure that the forces ministries work together more closely, and that "external defence and internal security should be harmonised". He pointed out in particular the importance of military personnel's living conditions and the conditions in which they serve, saying that they would be improved further, as "People who serve in high-risk conditions, in which their lives are often at risk, should feel cared for by their Motherland, the authorities, and the state they serve". Putin said that the ideal MO of a state "is a modern, efficiently managed, and

⁹ 'О совершенствовании военной организации Российской Федерации до 2020 года', Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, 5 July 2013, www.scrf.gov.ru.

¹⁰ 'О перспективах развития Вооружённых Сил, других войск, воинских формирований и органов, выполняющих задачи в области обороны, на период до 2030 года', Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, 22 November 2019, www.scrf.gov.ru; 'Заседание Совета Безопасности Российской Федерации', Президент России, 22 November 2019, www.kremlin.ru.

multifunctional system with a high informational and analytical capacity, and with a modern communication and reconnaissance capability enabling individual forces ministries to work together closely, and the state and military authorities to work together closely at every level”.

In this context, the inequality of status of bodies within the MO is significant. In view of the federal government’s exclusive jurisdiction in matters of security and defence, and federal oversight of enforcement of the related laws, the role of local structures only extends to tasks assigned by the central authorities. For this reason, the Russian legislature mainly focuses on stipulating the scope of their responsibilities. They are required, for instance, to ensure that the Armed Forces are continually supplied with power, to provide services and perform other tasks for the Armed Forces, other forces, and special formations, to perform civil defence and territorial defence tasks, make mobilisation preparations, and gather food reserves for wartime. In practice, the list of duties of local authorities is continually getting longer, which is illustrated by them being given responsibility for counteracting coronavirus as well.

Pandemic a test for Russia’s military organisation

The effects of epidemics vary, and can be of a political, economic and social nature. In Russia’s case, there are also organisational and military effects. The MO epidemiological test was not a success. The coordination-related functions of EMERCOM, the ministry with statutory responsibility for counteracting coronavirus, were suspended by the Kremlin, and responsibility for efficient anti-crisis measures was given to disoriented governors, who, at least initially, were left without the means to do so. The gap in the response system was filled by the “Armed Forces and other forces and bodies”, and these also benefitted. The new crisis management mechanisms were activated after some delay, incoherently, and chaotically. The devised political propaganda, which focused on the state’s successes in the fight against COVID-19, could not disguise the social reality. While, initially,

stress was placed on the deliverance assured by the mobilisation strategy of a “besieged fortress”¹¹, guaranteeing unity of the public and authorities in the face of a common threat, as the pandemic spread and Russians became increasingly weary of the crisis, the public mood deteriorated (one example of this is a protest that has been going for a number of weeks against the arrest of the governor of Khabarovsk Krai).

” Although in the past it has been seen as a defence system, today military organisation of the state is becoming an important element of management of the state.

A number of factors are behind this. Firstly, there is an increasing awareness that the highly developed system of oversight gives those subject to it and the authorities conducting oversight a great deal of discretion. Local officials (such as governors of hospitals) concentrated on shedding the burden of responsibility, by not disclosing the number of cases and lack of the means essential for fighting the virus. In addition, in Russia, the nature of reporting is to confirm the stipulated figures, leading the heads of the regions to declare the same number of cases and a low COVID-19 statistical mortality rate every day, while the ‘forces ministry people’ reported activities performed for show and a “crime pandemic”: in Kazan, in First Quarter 2020, there was a recorded increase in crime of 20%, a terrorist attack was foiled in Khabarovsk, and the figures for counteracting extremism doubled¹². Moreover, recently a ‘regulatory guillotine’ was set up, which operates selectively: in addition to information that on 21 July the government passed nearly 200 pieces of legislation on EMERCOM fire safety oversight, there are also reports, for example, that

¹¹ I. Wiśniewska, ‘Russia and the coronavirus pandemic: in praise of the besieged fortress’, OSW, 18 March 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

¹² ‘«Криминальная пандемия»: коронавирус поднял уровень преступности в Татарстане на четверть’, *Бизнес Online*, 16 April 2020, www.business-gazeta.ru; И. Бакин, ‘МВД отчиталось о росте более чем на 40% числа случаев экстремизма в 2020 году’, *Znak*, 13 July 2020, www.znak.com.

the Investigation Committee and Ministry of the Interior have begun work on amendments to the Criminal Code due to the increase in tax-related crime, which will definitely mean new opportunities for tax inspection authorities.

” The new crisis management mechanisms were activated after some delay, incoherently, and chaotically.

Secondly, the ‘forces ministries’ and firms with links to the ruling elite benefited from the pandemic. Independent journalists¹³ analysed 90,000 public contracts for goods and services relating to the fight against COVID-19, concluded in Second Quarter 2020 for a total of RUB 210 billion. One in ten of these contracts was given to the state-owned Rostech. Incomplete data (20% of tenders were kept secret) were compared against government grants for this purpose. In terms of the size of the grants, the Ministry of Defence is at the top of the list, coming higher than the health ministry and the Federal Medicine and Biology Agency (FMBA). The size of the grants given is a clear indication that they are discretionary (the Ministry of Defence was given RUB 13.4 billion, the Ministry of the Interior – 7.8, the President’s Office – 5.0, the prison service – 2.4, the FMBA – 2.5, Rosgvardiya – 1.9, EMERCOM – 1.3, and the General Prosecution Service – 1.0). Incidentally, these funds were not used for the intended purpose (for example, only RUB 1.5 billion of the awarded RUB 7.8 billion could be accounted for in Ministry of the Interior contracts).

The ‘forces ministries’ were given additional grants on numerous occasions. It is known, for example, that on 13 April the government granted, from the reserve fund, RUB 2.3 billion to the Ministry of Defence, RUB 21.8 million to Rosgvardiya, 120.7 million to the FSB, and 223.4 million to the prison service. On 13 May, the Ministry of Defence received RUB 2.769 billion from that fund, Rosgvardiya – 92.4 million, the FSB – 334.08 million, and the President’s Office – 194.8 million. In addition,

on 27 May, RUB 2 billion were transferred to the defence ministry for construction of hospitals¹⁴.

Thirdly, the ‘forces ministries’ are focused on political tasks, such as obtaining the constitutional plebiscite outcome required by the Kremlin, or not allowing large-scale protest, and not social tasks. Their activities before and after the referendum varied. While beforehand it was suggested that the ‘firm hand’ had mysteriously disappeared, following the passing of amendments to the Constitution the machine of repression was reactivated (for example the highly-publicised arrest of the governor of Khabarovsk Krai – officially for ordering a murder, unofficially for causing the party United Russia to become marginalised and as a warning to regional elites against possible disloyalty – and the journalist Ivan Safronov – for alleged espionage for the Czech security services).

In addition, most of the grants for the health ministry and FMBA were earmarked for biotechnology – tests and a vaccine. This activity was mainly aimed at generating benefits through export, and for the publicity value (Russia was the first to register a coronavirus vaccine)¹⁵.

Fourthly, the pandemic confirmed the poor performance of state institutions, demonstrated by the selective manner in which the law is applied (referred to as ‘hybrid law’¹⁶). The pandemic broadened the potential for corruption and abuse of office, for which quarantine restrictions create favourable conditions. For example, in Vladikavkaz, one cause of mass protest was the continued operation of a brewery owned by the head of North Ossetia, while the other production plants were closed due to coronavirus. In Moscow, fines for violating lockdown, which were announced by way of text messages, were a potential area of abuse. Collection of these fines was suspended.

¹³ Ю. Апухтина, Д. Сотников, ‘Кто заработал на коронавирусе больше всех’, Проект, 29 July 2020, www.proekt.media.

¹⁴ Распоряжение Правительства Российской Федерации от 13.04.2020 № 1006-р, Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации, www.pravo.gov.ru; Официальные документы, Стопкоронавирус.рф.

¹⁵ ‘Путин объявил о регистрации в России первой вакцины от коронавируса’, Известия, 11 August 2020, www.iz.ru.

¹⁶ Б. Вишневский, ‘Таинственное исчезновение «жесткой руки»’, Новая Газета, 31 March 2020, www.novayagazeta.ru.

Lastly, while the public can be fed the ‘propaganda of success’ on the part of the president, the members of the MO themselves are aware of the reality, and of inequality in the treatment of elements of the MO¹⁷. One of the ways in which the poor position of the Kremlin in the referendum in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (the only region in which the amendments to the Constitution were rejected) is interpreted is that it was a result of the expectations of ‘forces ministry people’ not being met (in this region the number is above the national average, while salaries are lower than average pay in the defence ministry)¹⁸. Members of the uniformed forces in some constituency election committees in garrisons and ZATO (closed areas) demonstrated openly anti-Kremlin sentiment – in these areas, support for the amendments to the Constitution was at between 40% and 60%, compared to the national average of just under 80%. This indicates that military personnel in the Ministry of Defence as well are not a unified group and do not support those in power unreservedly. This is a result of the dissonance between propaganda and reality in the state¹⁹.

Even though the outcome of the ‘pandemic test’ was not received well by the public, more testing of the MO is likely, due to tension in foreign

and domestic policy in Russia. Deviation from this concept for managing the state is not an option; it is an excellent instrument for wielding authoritarian power and an argument of good publicity all in one. The idea behind the MO of the state and society is that it will harmonise not only domestic security and external defence, but also the Kremlin’s social base. As there are no official data, only an approximation is possible – depending on the methodology used, experts estimate it to be 7–12 million people²⁰. The website Riddle includes in this group for example 2 million state and municipal officials, 1 million military personnel, 1 million civil employees in the Armed Forces, approximately 1 million police officers and interior ministry employees, approximately 1 million officers in security services and bodies, and also 5.8 million employees of the state. It is normal that this will not be a homogenous base. Not all of the members benefit from the system: the government in Russia is increasing the incomes of people in the uniformed forces, but it is not capable of ensuring regional officials a comparable standard of living.

To summarise, the Kremlin treats the MO as a panacea for any inconvenient issues, and above all as a platform for consolidating and mobilising the ‘forces ministries’ in times of crisis (political, financial, social crisis). These crises were emerging even before the pandemic, and were confirmed in a telling manner by the haste in which the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation were drawn up.

¹⁷ In January 2020, for example a 100% supplement was introduced for police officers and Rosgvardiya officers for maintaining public order. Установлены ежемесячные надбавки к окладу за сложность выполняемых задач сотрудникам ряда подразделений органов внутренних дел, военнослужащим и сотрудникам Росгвардии, Правительство России, 24 January 2020, www.government.ru.

¹⁸ С. Савина, ‘Триумф боли. Исследование о том, сколько в России силовиков и много ли они получают’, Проект, 19 February 2020, www.proekt.media.

¹⁹ П. Лузин, ‘Армия против Путина?’, Riddle, 7 July 2020, www.ridl.io/ru.

²⁰ See i.e. П. Лузин, ‘Корпоративный «федерализм»’, Riddle, 29 August 2019, www.ridl.io/ru; С. Савина, ‘Триумф боли. Исследование...’, *op. cit.*